

Some Talk of Alexander

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Once, when the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget was asked how he had time to write so much, he replied that fortunately he had not needed to read the work of Piaget. Were this response not securely attributed, one would swear that it had been made by Alexander Kazhdan. At any rate it typifies what many find alarming about the *destinataire* of this volume: a unique combination of absolute candor, overwhelming self-confidence, and mordant wit. Given Kazhdan's insistence that the historian's job is to understand the connection between social processes and individual psychology, and the fact that, in the West, his own history is at least as obscure as that of the land in which he spent his first fifty-six years, it seems useful, as he turns seventy, to probe the connection in his particular case. Since this is no less a celebration than a set of investigations, the observations that follow, like Aaron Gurevich's paper (below, pp. 89–96), will be personal in nature. Before we turn to our collective inquiry into *homo byzantinus*, these remarks are unashamedly *ad hominem*.

Like the adventurer whose encounter with America enjoys its quincentenary this year, Kazhdan came equipped with a dream—to realize on this continent the dictionary of Byzantine studies that Gyula Moravcsik had proposed in 1949 (*Byzantinoslavica* 10, p. 7) and that Johannes Irmscher and Alexander had begun to plan in the fifties. The failure of this joint enterprise was due to the trammels that bound Kazhdan, loosely or tightly according to the period, in the U.S.S.R. But the complexity of these bonds can be understood only in terms of Soviet, and indeed pre-Revolutionary, history. This, then, is the first subject of our inquiry.

Alexander Petrovič was born in Moscow on 3 September 1922 and raised by his maternal grandmother, Tamara Frumson. His grandfather, dead by that time, had had no official existence—to avoid military service his birth was never regis-

tered—and his father, Peisah Efros (or Pyotr Israilevič Každan, in the Russian version), was therefore listed as the child of what is now called a “single parent.” Despite what would in other cultures be considered a handicap, this man had not one but two careers. Before the Revolution which, as Alexander describes it, deprived his father “of everything but energy and stamina,” he had a leather factory near Nizhnij Novgorod. The “New Economic Policy,” initiated a year before Alexander's birth, allowed his father to recover some of his former prosperity but this, like NEP, was short-lived. The Great Purge of the thirties was not kind to “formers,” that is, those who were formerly bourgeois. But Pyotr Israilevič was able to succeed in another field, that of chemical technology. This man, who had never graduated from high school, finished university at the age of fifty-four; before then, he had invented the special lubricant that greased Soviet tanks during the Second World War.

Alexander's mother, Anna Frumson, belonged to a rich Jewish family well known before 1917 in Rostov-on-Don. Her imaginative life in a world full of music, poetry, and the French language enabled her, after the Revolution, to survive the clerical job that she hated. Those of us who were at Dumbarton Oaks in the early eighties recall this gracious woman—her gymnastic exercises woke me many a morning as I slept in the Kazhdans' basement. I remember, too, long surreal conversations with her. Since my spoken Russian was worse than Alexander's English ever was, these took place in French, on her side an elegant, outmoded form of the language such as Turgenev must have used.

The successive effects of collectivization, the Great Purge, Stalin's dictatorship, and the war on a woman of Anna Frumson's sort can only be imagined. For his part, her son dismisses the physical deprivations and material shortages of this last period. “Of course I was freezing cold in the winter

but, all in all, I had a happy childhood." Perhaps inevitably, this included indoctrination in the Communist creed: in 1934–35 he published poems celebrating official festivities in such Moscow newspapers as *Pionerskaja Pravda*—creations, needless to say, that are not included in the immense list of Alexander's publications (below, pp. 5–26) that Simon Franklin has been able to put together. Happiness, some sage has written, is not something one experiences but something one remembers. Alexander remembers that, under Stalin, his father's stay in jail lasted "only a month or a little longer;" that in school he was the principal's favorite and as good at math as he was at humanities; that he was admitted without examination to Moscow University; and that "even the war saved me." Short-sighted to the point of virtual blindness, he was not drafted into the army. He was therefore able to graduate from the *pedinstitut* (pedagogical college) at Ufa in 1942 and, a year later, to begin graduate studies at Moscow University. He then moved to the Academy of Sciences where his supervisor was Evgenij Alekseevič Kosminskij, the historian of medieval England, whom Alexander loved, as he says, "with the freshness of a young heart."

In 1946, young Jewish scholars like Kazhdan and Gurevič were drafted into Byzantine studies. The extent to which this revival of pre-Soviet concern with Byzantium was a part of the nationalism which, after the war, swept the U.S.S.R., is unclear. At any rate, when Alexander passed his doctoral *kandidatskaja*, anti-Semitism—the concomitant of this nationalism—meant that there was no place for him at the Academy. For three years (1947–49) he taught at the *pedinstitut* in Ivanovo. Characteristically, he complains not about this job but the ideology that sent him there. A position some two hundred miles from the capital might not seem like internal exile, until one realizes that it deprived him of the things he most cared about. The library at Ivanovo had almost no foreign books, and his family remained in Moscow.

In 1944 Alexander had married Rimma (Musja) Ivjanskaja; their son, David, was born two years later. For the same reason as drove Alexander to the provinces, Musja had no job in Moscow. Eventually she found work in a publishing house, and an income that they needed when, until Stalin's death, they depended on her salary and the royalties from his books. These, he notes with a wry nod toward American academic royalties, were "substantial." By this time his first monograph—on

Byzantine agrarian history (Bibliography, no. 23)—had appeared and he was co-author of the standard text on ancient history (Bibliography, no. 13), used in colleges throughout the country. Even before these successes he was fired from Ivanovo as a "cosmopolitan" (*sc.* Jew), but managed to wrest a better job from the Department of Education, at the *pedinstitut* in Tula where he stayed for three years. In utterly non-Anglo-Saxon fashion he says "the students loved me." While there he wrote a number of articles for leading Soviet scholarly periodicals and, no less important, finished his thesis for the *doktorskaja*. Even though no instructor at Tula could boast such accomplishments, he was fired in 1952, ostensibly in the name of a reduction in staff. In fact, his position was immediately given to a native Russian woman without a degree or publications.

This resurgent persecution was less personally painful than that which had ended his job at Ivanovo. There, Alexander and three others had been "cosmopolitans." In 1949 not every Jew had been a "cosmopolitan," but every Jewish writer, painter, or university teacher was potentially one. This was because they were "rootless," a condition that made them the enemy, subversives ready to grovel before Western civilization. The Party's normal cure was a trial, condemnation, and even the Gulag. Alexander was accused of describing one of Stalin's alleged creations as "a book for housewives" (a charge he denies), yet he suffered nothing more than a discharge and a prohibition on his right to teach. Another of the four, Nina Razumovskaja, could not stand the witch-hunt and committed suicide.

Fired from Tula, he had no work in a land where, as he puts it, hundreds of ignorant men and women taught ancient and medieval history. But this time the misery was short-lived. Directly after Stalin's death in 1953, and *post hoc propter hoc* in Alexander's construction, he found a job in a small college at Velikije Luki, west of Moscow. Now he could think about defending his doctoral thesis, the route to a full professorship and a position which in the Soviet Union was well paid and socially respected. But the way was not easy: he was only thirty-one and not a Party member. Worse, he still had the habit of speaking his mind. There were many to block him—he names Lipšic, Levčenko, Pigulevskaja, and Udal'cova.

Although in 1956 he was able to return to Moscow and find a job in the Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences, he did not get his second

doctoral degree until 1961. Despite Khruščev's Thaw, the position was that of a low-paid junior research associate. Every morning he was obliged to "clock in." Even so, he was happy. His commuting days were over; he had access to excellent libraries and could publish his second book—the well-known study of city and countryside in ninth- and tenth-century Byzantium (Bibliography, no. 89). The sixties were, for Alexander, his best years in the U.S.S.R.

Till then he had worked according to the Soviet model, which dictated that the true subjects of history were peasants and artisans. Now he could broaden his range. The measure of this is the number and scope of his publications, and the obvious example his *Byzantine Culture* (Bibliography, no. 285). The latitude that he now enjoyed is evident in his professional work in the narrow sense—the huge sequence of papers and reviews in *Vizantijskij Vremennik*, not to speak of the preparation of his book on the *Ruling Class* (Bibliography, no. 450) that some consider to be his masterpiece. This new freedom is no less manifest in the collective reevaluation of Christianity: from being the religion of the exploiters, the revisionists, including Kazhdan, began to view it as a major force in the formation of civilization; the early days of the faith could now be treated as historical rather than as mythical events. But the clearest sign of the Thaw, and perhaps the aspect in which Alexander could most rejoice, was his collaboration in the liberal periodical *Novyj Mir*, then in its halcyon days under the famous editor Tvardovskij. He used this organ to discuss historical problems that bore on the present and the immediate past, writing articles and reviews that raised such issues as despotism, bureaucracy, and the negative impact of revolution on morality and culture (Bibliography, nos. 228, 292, 333–35, 351).

By comparison with the Stalinist terror, this was liberty indeed. But Montesquieu was wrong when he observed that liberty is the right to do whatever the law permits. One's freedom can be hedged in all sorts of unwritten ways, as Alexander's experiences in the seventies demonstrate. He was still able to work as he wished. He had contacts with foreign scholars, although he was never able to travel abroad except as a member of a tourist group. He could publish papers in Western journals, though always with the permission of Udalcova, the head of his institute. He could avoid quoting Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but only by dint of avoiding an index of names. (There is no such

index in the Russian version of his *Byzantine Culture* or *Ruling Class*.) Tvardovskij was removed from *Novyj Mir* and Alexander ceased to write for it. Most ominous of all was the growing acrimony between himself and Udalcova.

The period of stagnation, usually associated in the West with Brezhnev, touched Kazhdan but of course bore on society as a whole; the political and the personal are inextricably bound. In 1976 his son David emigrated to the United States. Musja immediately lost her job. Alexander was told that he would never be allowed overseas to meet his son and grandchildren. (His paper at the International Byzantine Congress in Athens that year was read in his absence: he was said to have been ill.) The censoring of his articles and the censoring of his behavior increased. He was being hounded out, deliberately and systematically. Musja and Alexander left, smuggling his precious manuscripts, in October 1978. In February 1979, via Vienna and Paris, they arrived at Dumbarton Oaks.

Statistics suggest the outward face of this upheaval: in the twelve months before his departure he published five times as much as in the following year. Meanwhile, in his own land, he became an "unperson." His name was expunged from Soviet publications on Byzantine studies; for several years he appeared in almost no bibliographies or footnotes. Some scholars managed to make the occasional reference to his writings, but only by the title of the work, not by the name of its author. But the inner meaning of scarcely elected exile lies in problems about which he has not written. Among these, the question of whether a humanist could work in a new and alien milieu was probably paramount. I recall his astonishment at the individualist cast of the academic world in America, how shocked he was at the apparent lack of any interest in collaborative enterprises at Dumbarton Oaks. If this climate has changed—and both the *Dictionary of Byzantium* and the new hagiography project suggest that it has—it is due in no small part to Alexander.

For a while he could survive on the "food" he had brought with him from Moscow. Typically, and generously, this was shared with Western scholars. His *People and Power* (Bibliography, no. 575), produced in association with Giles Constable, was prepared as a series of lectures for the Collège de France before his departure. His *Studies in Byzantine Literature* (Bibliography, no. 619), translated and rewritten with Simon Franklin, comprised a group of articles published in the U.S.S.R. Ann

Wharton Epstein added the art historical content to Alexander's *Change in Byzantine Culture* (Bibliography, no. 628), but the core of the book had been written as part of the second volume to the *Vizantijskaja kul'tura*. Of course these associations served Alexander's purposes; they also helped to insinuate the idea of collaboration into Byzantine studies in America.

In a characteristically hagiographical image, he says of those days that he felt like a corpse on which the hair and nails kept growing. For a corpse, Alexander was very lively. At Dumbarton Oaks he finished both the alphabetical and subject-matter concordance (the latter a new genre in Byzantine scholarship) to the work of Niketas Choniates. For a saint, his behavior was still far from holy, but this is the place for neither an extended account of Alexander's adjustment to Washington nor a sober evaluation of what he produced there. (For the earlier works, noted above, the interested reader will turn to Jakov Ljubarskij's assessment in *Voprosy Istorii*, no. 3 [March 1990], 174–80.) Even so, it is worthwhile attempting a description of these two processes, unfolding simultaneously in one man's mind. No doubt the hardest accommodation that Alexander had to make to his new home lay in the matter of language. While all emigrés suffer to a greater or lesser extent in this respect, for a man who had spent his life working with words, the anguish of transmuting the rich vocabulary of Russian and of mastering the vagaries of English syntax was palpable. He had to choose between solecisms and silence, the former represented by the titles of articles such as nos. 567, 577, 597 in the Bibliography, but the latter impossible. The burden was made all the more acute by Alexander's vast, and unrecognized, knowledge of English literature, "high" and "low." (Unlike some American readers, he will probably recognize the allusion in the title of this piece.) Some transatlantic accents continue to defeat him: his silence after many public lectures does not necessarily connote disapproval.

Language, of course, is more than a medium. It is the genesis of reality as we know it, just as history is not an investigation of truth but its origin; it is not simply embedded in ways of thinking but con-

stitutes those ways. Initially unable to bend English to accommodate his views on the thousands of entries drafted for the *Dictionary*, Alexander offended some authors and puzzled others by his approach to the field. He was driven by his sense of the deficiencies of modern historiography, "neither sufficiently material . . . nor sufficiently spiritual, speaking of laws and political acts but not of ideas and manners" as Michelet (*Histoire de France*, ed. C. Mettra [Lausanne, 1965], I, 49) put it. Preferring ideas to bibliography (as the *Dictionary* editors learned), he proceeded in the manner of his own articles which eschew extended footnotes. He was, as always, ready to risk a generalization and to prize an anecdote over a textual emendation.

The world of scholarship is primarily aware of two things about Alexander: first that, like Aby Warburg (see G. Bing, *Rivista storica italiana* 72 [1960], 72), he can make human voices speak from documents of seemingly small importance. Secondly, that he is the man who taught Byzantinists to count. On the other hand, he is well aware of the limits of quantification. I fully expect him one day to point out that Hamlet did *not* say that life is stale, flat, and unprofitable 79% of the time. "On the other hand" is a favorite phrase of Alexander's. The recognition of ambiguity and contradiction is for him an analytical tool. This leads not to equivocation but to humility (a word I never thought I would use in connection with Kazhdan). His terse comments on other people's drafts are deliberately written in pencil: "If I am wrong," he says, "then erase them." What I used to find intolerable, I now find endearing. Cosimo de' Medici once pointed out that nowhere is it written that we should forgive our friends. But this does not relieve us of the obligation to understand, or the opportunity to love, them.

Alexander does not have a monopoly on the candor that strikes right to the heart of an issue. When I first mentioned to Musja the idea of this Festschrift, she shrugged and said, "So how does he benefit?" We can only hope that the answer is obvious.

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